NOTHING TO LOSE BUT UNCERTAINTY

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By
The Rev. V. P. Stewart
Rector, St. James' Church
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Whether this tract is of any importance to you depends quite largely upon what you think of your religion. You may very possibly be one of those who give lip service only to the Church and whose own private opinion, never uttered, is somewhat as follows: "I've been a respectable Episcopalian all of my life. I was baptized when I was six months old. When I was fourteen and my parents felt that I was old enough to know what I was doing, I was confirmed by the Bishop, after I had quickly memorized the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. When I was confirmed, everyone seemed to think I'd done a great thing. I don't know exactly why, except that they said I'd 'joined the Church' now, and I was ready for all the Church's teachings and responsibilities involved. From that day to this, I've never found out what the Church's teachings are, although I can find my way in the Prayer Book as well as the next fellow. But the 'Church's teachings'! I've heard too many conflicting reports. For a while, we had a minister who talked about such things as Christ's Church, as though the Episcopal Church were something very special. And he talked too about the Presence of Jesus in the Holy Communion (The Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, he called it), as though Jesus Christ was actually there. Every once in a while that minister would in a very reverent tone mention 'blessed Mary.' And he was always talking about praying for the beloved dead. That used to exasperate me, for certainly after a fellow is dead the book is closed. I don't know about this, personally, but I've been told that this minister never ate meat on Friday. Now certainly that's a lot of nonsense. There was quite a turmoil raised one Sunday, when he said that Christ's Church taught the confession of sins in the presence of a priest is a good thing for the soul. A lady spoke up at the next Auxiliary meeting and said that confession to a priest was an abomination in the sight of God and that the little sins that she committed were between herself and her God."

Now when you get right down to it, isn't this

whole outlook upon religion a rather unsatisfactory thing? Aren't you, honestly, pretty well fed up with not knowing? Aren't you dissatisfied, deep down inside, with not knowing what to believe? Don't you wish that you had some good solid convictions on which to base your religious position, something more substantial than liking a formal service and a vested choir, some reasons with more surety back of them than just the fact that your parents and grandparents were Episcopalians?

You are a practical person, so let's face the situation. If you knew no more about your business or profession than you actually do about the Episcopal Church, where would you be? You really study your business or your profession, don't you? You don't depend on prejudice or what someone tells you. You find out all you can. You may reply: "Yes, but the books about business or profession are available to anyone, and we can see that the things taught in the books actually work out in practice." My friend, there is a book, which you've held in your hands every time you've gone to an Episcopal service and that is the Book of Common Prayer. The whole teaching of the Church is there. And those who have lived according to its teachings have found that they work.

Before you toss this whole idea aside, be practical and thoughtful. You don't have to be uncertain any more, you can be completely sure. If you are really honest with yourself you'll give it a try. The final test in everything you've ever undertaken is, "Try it, and see if it works." You've everything to gain and nothing but uncertainty to lose. Try living the full life of the Church! To do so you're going to have to take a few steps on faith! Yes, I can hear you say: "I thought there was a catch in it! You're asking me to swallow some things with a coating of faith." But is this so unfair? Have you ever started anything in your life without an act of faith? As a matter of fact, you can't even cross the street except by an act of faith. Without faith in your ability to get to the other side you'd spend the rest of your life on one side of the street. So, how about it? I'm asking of you the most common thing on earth—an act of faith. Faith in what? Faith that there is a God, faith

supported by your own reason for certainly there is more evidence for than against the reality of God. Faith that Jesus Christ is the Incarnate Son of God. History proves as nearly as it can prove anything that Jesus Christ was actually on earth. We have the same kind of historical proof of the existence of Jesus Christ that we have of the existence of Julius Caesar. Faith that Jesus Christ established a Church, which has existed from His time to today. This doesn't call for much faith, for history gives proof beyond any question.

Now, with these three affirmations, we can really get somewhere. Can we learn whether the Episcopal Church is a part of the Holy Catholic Church established by Christ? Well, the Church in England can be clearly traced back to as early as 314 A.D., when British Bishops are known to have been present at the Church Council of Arles, in southern France. The Church in England can be shown, beyond question, to be a part of the Holy Catholic Church created by Christ.

Now let us start using that Prayer Book you've handled so many times. It's going to be our guide for living the full life in the Church. Turn to the Preface, page vi, near the bottom of the page: "it will also appear that this Church is far from intending to depart from the Church of England in any essential point of doctrine, discipline or worship." Clearly, then, the Episcopal Church is a part of the Holy Catholic Church established by Christ. It would seem reasonable, then, to believe that in the Prayer Book we could find the teachings of that Church.

First let's see how Christ's Church is to be governed. Turn to page 529 in the Prayer Book, read the Preface: "It is evident unto all men, diligently reading Holy Scripture and ancient Authors, that from the Apostles' times there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church—Bishops, Priests, and Deacons. Which Offices were evermore had in such reverend estimation, that no man might presume to execute any of them, except he were first called, tried, examined, and known to have such qualities as are requisite for the same; and also by public Prayer, with Imposition of Hands, were approved and admitted thereunto by lawful Authority." This preface

goes on to tell how Bishops, Priests and Deacons are made. The Bishops are successors to the Apostles, through laying-on-of-hands with intention to continue Apostolic orders. The succession right back to the Apostles themselves is strengthened by having three Bishops lay their hands on the head of any priest to be consecrated Bishop. Now the word Bishop comes from the Greek 'Episcopos' which means 'overseer.' Each Bishop is a peer of the Church, but, like his predecessors, the Apostles, he is an equal among equals. Among his other duties, a Bishop is charged to drive away false doctrine and to ordain Priests and Deacons.

A Deacon is authorized to do very little more than a layman can do. The Diaconate is a subordinate office in the ministry wherein a young man spends from six months to a year as a sort of intern. When later he is ordained Priest, he is ordained especially for three things, which he couldn't do as a Deacon. Turn to page 543—"Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the Imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful Dispenser of the Word of God, and of his holy Sacraments; In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." These three things, the forgiving of sins, the dispensing of the Word of God and the administering of his holy Sacraments he could not do before. As a Deacon he could read sermons approved by the Bishop and he could administer the Sacrament of Baptism in the absence of a Priest, but only as a Priest can he pronounce absolution, preach his own sermons, celebrate the Holy Communion and administer other sacraments.

Do away with the old idea that the Church is saying that any man, Priest, or Bishop, can himself forgive your sins. When you received your college degree, you received it at the hands of a man. He didn't give you the degree, he spoke as the representative of the University and conferred the degree. Your hours and years of toil made the degree possible. When you tell your sins in the presence of a Priest, you will first have spent a long time prepar-

ing for the confession. You will have examined your conscience thoroughly. Your heart will break at the enormity of your sins. You will be truly penitent and you will resolve not to sin again. The Priest, speaking for God's Church and as God's agent, (just as he is God's agent in the Communion Service), will speak the words of absolution, for which he received authority when he was ordained. You will rise from your knees forgiven and with a feeling of unbelievable cleanness. There will be a lightness in your heart. The depressing burden of the old guilt will be gone. Believe me, I speak with conviction. I know. I've been there!

And the Church doesn't speak of this authority to pronounce absolution of sin only in the ordination office. Turn to page 7 and read the Declaration of Absolution at the top of the page, "hath given power, and commandment, to his Ministers, to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins." Now it is possible for sins to be forgiven without confessing them in the presence of a Priest. The Church does not make Sacramental Confession a compulsory matter, and it's much better this way, for confession in the presence of a priest thus will not become an enforced habit. You'll make your Sacramental Confession because you are really penitent and wish to feel sure of your forgiveness. Turn now to page 88, "therefore, if there be any of you, who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but requireth further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or to some other Minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that he may receive such godly counsel and advice, as may tend to the quieting of his conscience, and the removing of all scruple and doubtfulness." It's a joy Christ is offering to you through His Church! Think of it! To be positive that those things you've kept hidden for so long are surely forgiven! No more guessing and hoping—you can know! Now turn to page 313, look at the parts in small print: "Then shall the sick person be moved to make a special confession of his sins, if he feels his conscience troubled with any matter; after which confession, on evidence of his repentance, the Minister shall assure him of God's mercy and forgiveness."

Do you begin to see what I mean by "nothing to lose but uncertainty"? Well, we're going on to talk about the gift of God Himself. I'm asking you to remember, since it is the belief of Christ's Holy Church, that by a Holy Mystery the Master Himself comes to us in the Holy Communion! Impossible? What is impossible? That Christ should be present under the forms of bread and wine? When I remember that all I have to do is flick a switch and pick Beethoven's Fifth Symphony right out of the air, and that the brain of man devised this mystery, I don't find it so hard to believe that Almighty God could use bread and wine for feeding my soul and for His Sacramental Presence. Besides, Jesus Himself when He instituted the Holy Communion on the night of His Betrayal said "This is My Body," and "This is My Blood". The Greek word is "esti". It signifies "is", not "means". This was certainly accepted by the whole Church before any division came over lesser matters. I would have been much surprised if God hadn't used some such means as bread and wine to communicate Himself to us and to make it possible for us to adore His Presence. If He hadn't, He would have been going contrary to His usual methods. He used a human body in which to come among mankind at Bethlehem; He used clay to convey His healing grace to a blind man; He used ordinary human beings like ourselves, the Twelve, for the foundation of His Church. He was always using some physical means to give spiritual gifts to men.

But, we're not debating the matter, we're learning the teaching of the Church from her Prayer Book. Turn to pages 80 and 81—the words of the Master are repeated by the Priest, a Priest ordained by a Bishop, who is a successor to the Apostles who were with Christ when He said the words for the first time, "This is My Body—This is My Blood". On page 81, we pray that we "may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ". And note, the Church doesn't take it lightly, she capitalizes the words Body and Blood in the Consecration Prayer, just as she capitalizes the word Son! On page 82 in the middle of the page is a prayer we call the "Prayer of Humble Access". In if we pray that we may so eat the flesh and drink

the blood of Christ, that our sinful bodies may be made clean, etc.

The Church has some beautiful hymns which she uses in connection with the Holy Communion. It is clear to anyone that the Church wouldn't authorize hymns which are contrary to her belief. Read hymn No. 197, "King of kings, yet born of Mary, as of old on earth he stood, Lord of lords in human vesture, in the Body and the Blood, He will give to all the faithful his own self for heavenly food," or No. 199, verse 4, "Word-made-flesh, true bread he maketh by his word his Flesh to be, Wine his Blood, when man partaketh, though his senses fail to see, faith alone, when sight forsaketh, shows true hearts the mystery," or 223, often used when the Holy Communion is celebrated at a funeral, "Jesus, Son of Mary, Fount of life alone, here we hail thee present on thine Altar Throne, Humbly we adore thee, Lord of endless might, in the mystic symbols veiled from earthly sight."

I can't tell you of the unutterable joy and happiness and peace which passeth all understanding that will be yours when you are able to take this heavenly truth, which the Church has treasured for you, into your heart and mind. You will no longer flounder along with the idea that God is probably everywhere. You'll know that you can actually come into His Presence somewhere. You can go into the holy stillness of His Church, where in the soft dusk a tiny light will be flickering before the Tabernacle. You'll kneel in His Presence and adore your God. You'll know, with a knowledge that suffuses your whole being, that beneath the consecrated loveliness of the pure, white Host is Jesus.

My friend, if you're still with me, we're now well on the way to certainty. The old days of doubt and frustration are almost in the past. But that was back there when we were still entirely Protestant in our point of view. What? You say you are a Protestant? Not if you are going to believe your Prayer Book. Oh, I know the title page says "the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U. S. A.", but that is simply a legal title and has nothing to do with doctrine. You notice the whole title is "THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER and Administration of the Sacra-

ments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of THE CHURCH according to the use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America." The key expression is "The Church". How is "The Church" described in your Prayer Book? On page 15 in the Apostles' Creed it's "holy Catholic Church"; on page 37 in the Prayer for the Church, it's "holy Catholic Church"; on page 47 in the Bidding Prayer, it's "holy Catholic Church"; on page 71 in the Nicene Creed in the Communion Service, it's "Catholic and Apostolic Church;" on page 317 in the Visitation of the sick at the top of the page it's "in the communion of the Catholic Church". The word Catholic needn't bother you for a moment. The great majority of the things we fear in this life are fearful simply because we don't know about them—they're strange to us. The word Catholic comes from a combination of two Greek words, which mean "according to the whole". St. Ignatius used the term early in the second century. It was used to distinguish the Holy Apostolic Church from the various heretical sects which were springing up. It has been used ever since to designate that portion of the Church which has believed, taught, and worshipped according to the Faith Christ gave to His Apostles. The Prayer Book says the Episcopal Church is Catholic. We can believe what that book says.

Before we'd ever bothered to learn what the Church teaches in her Prayer Book we had a lot of negative ideas. Remember? No fasting days, no praying for the souls of the departed, no asking those in the Church beyond the Veil to pray for us, no particular reverence for blessed Mary. (When I say "blessed", I'm quoting from the Prayer Book page 235.) Remember our acts of faith which we made some time ago? If Jesus founded a Church which was established and made firm by His Apostles and which is here today under the direction of the successors of those Apostles, then surely it is commissioned to teach the TRUTH—and that Truth may be found in its official authorized Book. How about "no fasting"? Turn to page xxxii in your Prayer Book. You'll note that Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are given emphasis by being set apart. You'll also note that all the Fridays of the year

are Fast Days, except they be Christmas Day, The Epiphany or any Friday which may intervene. Obviously, this is not a matter essential to salvation. But if we're going to try to live the full life in the Church, let's not hedge now. Abstain from meat on Friday, remembering that the Master made His Atoning Sacrifice on Friday. You'll be surprised how such a simple thing helps you to keep close to Him when you might otherwise forget. We make a great stir once a year about our services and prayers on Good Friday in preparation for Easter, the Festival of the Resurrection. The Church by her appointing Fridays as Fast Days, tells us to remember every Friday as a little Good Friday in preparation for every Sunday as a little Easter.

Now the book is not closed when you die. At least the Church says it isn't, and we're trying to live the full life in the Church, aren't we? The Church teaches us a good many facts concerning souls. One of these facts is that the souls of our departed loved ones will certainly be benefited by our prayers. The Church teaches this so emphatically that she has enshrined this doctrine in her most sacred service, the Holy Eucharist. Every time the Eucharist is celebrated we pray "And we also bless thy holy Name for all thy servants departed this life in thy faith and fear, beseeching thee to grant them continual growth in thy love and service" (Prayer Book, page 74). Your Church teaches that souls are especially to be prayed for in connection with our other prayers in the pleading of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary, else why should she have placed this particular prayer in this particular place? The Church further emphasizes this teaching by providing a special Collect, Epistle and Gospel on page 268, to be used in the Celebration of Holy Communion at the burial of the dead.

What does all this say? Simply that after you have provided a lovely funeral and nice memorials there is and always will be, something even greater that you may do for your dear ones. In this very special way you may commend them unto the loving care of your Heavenly Father. Now turn to page 317, read the Litany for the Dying; on page 319, read the Absolution to be said by the Priest, and the

Commendation, and the Commendatory Prayer when the soul is departed, and read the Prayer for Memorial Day on page 42, and the Prayer for an Anniversary of One Departed on page 586. Was anything ever more beautiful and inspiring than this care for departed souls?

This leads us to consideration of a most comforting doctrine, which makes it possible to say, "Of course the Saints will pray for us." Your Church, on page 592, says the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed ought thoroughly to be received and believed; for they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture. One of the statements in the Apostles' Creed is "I believe in the Communion of Saints". Think of communion between you and your wife, between you and your children, between you and your friends. Did you ever hear of a one-sided communion? Surely, the plainest of common sense would tell us, even if the Church didn't, that we may ask our dear departed ones and all the saints in the Church Triumphant, to pray for us. And what a sustaining help it is in time of stress to call out to those beyond to pray for us! And with what renewed courage we may face adversity, knowing that we are strengthened by the prayers of the faithful!

All of this, my friend, is your Church. It's all right there in that great book you hold in your hand every time you attend a service in the Episcopal Church. If by any chance you find a service in use with which you aren't familiar, don't decide immediately that the Prayer Book is being abandoned. Just read what is written at the top of page vii.

Yes, all of this and a vast deal more, is your Church. But this is enough to accomplish what we set out to do. You have the tools in your hand with which to forge a shining armor of Faith, which can never be pierced by the sharp arrows of sorrow, doubt, bewilderment, and bitterness, for it will be girded about you with strong bands of certainty and conviction. Your life will be a joy to you and to all those dear to you!